

The Rock 'n' Roll Prophet of Memphis and the 40 year ride of Asleep at the Wheel.

Sam Phillips The Man Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll
by Peter Guralnick (Little Brown)

Comin' Right At Ya
by Ray Benson and David Menconi (University of Texas Press)

reviewed by Peter Stone Brown

Sam Phillips, the man behind Sun Records was easily one of the most important figures in the history of American popular music. To put it simply, if it wasn't for Sam Phillips and his tiny little record label, at first staffed by two people, we would not know about Howlin' Wolf, Ike Turner, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Charlie Rich, among several others.

Phillips was a small town Alabama kid from a big family who struggled to make it through the depression. Even though times were hard, his family took care of those in need, something that stuck with him his entire life. On a trip to Dallas with one of his brothers and some friends to hear a preacher, they passed through Memphis and Beale Street lit a light in Sam he never forgot.

He started working in radio both as an announcer and an engineer, but he was always tinkering with the sound of the stations he worked for trying to make them better and he moved from small towns to Nashville and finally in Memphis. Along the way he married, and also had a couple of breakdowns checking himself into institutions for electroshock therapy, something he'd read about. After a couple of years in Memphis he decided to go into business for himself, opening the Memphis Recording Service with Marion Keisker, a radio engineer and programmer as his assistant. Working out of a small storefront, he recorded anything he could from weddings to business meetings and whatever musicians would come around. Since he was a kid, Phillips heard a sound in his mind, one he couldn't articulate. Someone tipped him to a blues singer who did an early morning radio broadcast on Saturdays under the name Howlin' Wolf, and with Wolf, Phillips heard the sound that was in his brain, which is best exemplified by one of the rawest and most explosive blues records ever made, Wolf's "Moanin' At Midnight." Recording Wolf, Phillips discovered the method he would use to record musicians from then on which was trying to make them feel as comfortable in the studio was possible so they'd feel free enough to create. Anything but a perfectionist, Phillips was in search of that indefinable magic. If a phone rang during a recording, or a guitar player hit a bum note, Phillips didn't

care as long as the all-important feel was there. His attitude was, that's what happened, and that's what makes it real.

Despite success with many of the blues artists he recorded, including the hit "Rocket 88" which many consider to be the first rock and roll song, Phillips started having business problems, some of his own making. Of his own making was "Rocket 88" was credited to Jackie Brenston (the vocalist) and his Delta Cats when the group was actually Ike Turner's Kings of Rhythm featuring Jackie Brenston (who was Turner's saxophonist). The problems not necessarily of his own making were that the record labels primarily Modern and Chess who issued the recordings in Phillips studio always found a way not to pay or to pay a lot less than they were supposed to. Somewhat reluctantly Phillips decided to start his own record label. The following year Elvis Presley records two songs at Memphis Recording Service intended to be a gift for his mother. Somewhere along the line Phillips gets the notion that if he could find a white kid who could sing like a black man, he might make some money. Marion Keisker kept bringing up the kid who'd recorded the songs for his mother, and finally Phillips told her to call him. Sam had Elvis come in the studio by himself and sing everything he knew, but it wasn't clicking. He then put him together with guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black and it still wasn't clicking. Phillips started recording them anyway, and after a break, Elvis started joking around singing Arthur Crudup's "That's Alright Mama," with Moore and Black joining in. Phillips who was doing something else, stopped them and said, "What are you doing?" When they said, they didn't know, Phillips said, back up and do it again."

Elvis Presley's success led other musicians to knock on Phillips' door, such as Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins. And in those musicians he heard something, but often had to work with them to find what it was, and once he did the result was hit songs. However, Phillips kept signing new artists and in the excitement over his latest signing his older artists started to feel neglected. Meanwhile Presley had become a big star, acquired a manager Colonel Tom Parker and in cahoots with other music biz people Phillips was working with started the process to get Elvis off Sun and onto a major label. And though Phillips would personally drive all over the South and into Texas promoting each Elvis single, they never did as well as intended. Finally, Phillips sold Presley's contract to RCA Records for \$35,000 and an interest in Presley's publishing. While that figure would later be scoffed at, Sun Records was in deep debt especially to the IRS. That money got Phillips out of debt and through various investments, especially in a budding radio empire, he became a very wealthy man.

In 1956, a piano player from Louisiana named Jerry Lee Lewis showed up at Sun accompanied by his father. Phillips was out of town, but had hired a musician and engineer named Cowboy Jack Clement as his assistant and

Clement was sure Phillips would be ecstatic over Lewis and he was right. Phillips considered Lewis to be the most musically talented of all his artists, and Lewis was something of a walking encyclopedia of music who knew hundreds of songs. Lewis was well on his way to being a huge star when in 1958, he toured England bringing along his 13-year-old bride who was also his cousin and no one was quite sure whether or not he was still married to his first wife. Phillips, to his credit, did not kick Jerry Lee off his label and continued to record him, but it would be several years before Jerry Lee Lewis sold a lot of records again. Also that year both Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash left Sun for Columbia Records. Phillips took the Cash departure particularly hard. It was the beginning of the end, even though Phillips was building a new studio and starting a new label.

All of this is told in extreme detail as well as several other aspects of Phillips' life. He was a complex and fascinating man and undoubtedly someone who was both fun and difficult to live with at the same time. Author Peter Guralnick, someone who knows and loves American roots music became a friend of Phillips and clearly not only admires him, but admittedly loved him. But he may have gotten too close, and in wanting to tell Phillips' story accurately both the story and the drama get bogged down by the amount of research Guralnick did.

The book is basically in chronological order with the various chapters spanning several years and even decades. It is real easy to forget what year you're reading about and then even more difficult to figure it out. Guralnick writes in super long sentences and every time he introduces a new person, he finds it necessary to include their history no matter who they are or their importance to the overall story. Sometimes several people and their bios can be included in one sentence. The result is a tedious read. You keep waiting for the book to catch fire and draw you in so you can't put it down and it simply does not happen. Early in the book, I thought, well, Elvis will come along and then this book will soar, but it didn't happen. So then I thought, surely the Jerry Lee Lewis England disaster, but again it just doesn't come to life. And keep in mind that every single musician I've mentioned was something of a maniac and there are tons of great stories about all of them. And keep in mind that Sam Phillips himself (at least in his later years) was also something of a maniac, part preacher, part teacher, part wise man, and part fool, who never divorced his devoted wife, though he spent most of his life with another woman and had affairs with several others and none of them left him. And it's not as if various other aspects of Phillips life aren't revealed. He was apparently a voracious reader who would intensely research any topic that took his interest whether it was engineering or illness. And who would have thought that Sam Phillips was a supporter of Fidel Castro so much so that when he won the revolution, Phillips called him to congratulate him. And the book also reveals that Phillips had a heart and things he experienced as a youth stayed with him

his entire life and he was always trying to help out friends and family members who hit hard times.

Yes, you do eventually realize that Phillips was an incredible person who was not only the real deal himself, but interested in the real deal in music and in life. Somewhere along the line Guralnick simply forgot to tell the story and in the end, the book feels not like a biography but a reference book.

Ray Benson is the leader of Asleep At The Wheel, America's foremost exponents of Western Swing and the music of Bob Wills. Asleep At The Wheel has been performing for 46 years which is no small achievement and more than 100 musicians have passed through its ranks or more accurately ridden the bus. Full disclosure: Ray Benson and I have been friends for most of our lives. Benson's life has pretty much been spent on a tour bus and a year or so ago, he calculated the miles he traveled touring and it was a million.

The book is subtitled "How a Jewish Yankee Hippie Went Country or The Often Outrageous History of Asleep At The Wheel." Ray Seifert grew up in a suburb right outside Northwest Philly and was already playing music on major stages before he was 11.

He tells his story informally, leaving both the good and the bad in. The book never feels like a tell all because he maintains a sense of humor throughout. The prologue starts in 1979 with The Wheel playing a club in Lubbock on Grammy Night to virtually no one, and then trying to get paid. While waiting for the club owner to come up with the money, someone runs onto the bus and yells, "Y'all just won a Grammy!"

Asleep At The Wheel has actually won a lot of Grammys and they keep appearing throughout the book, and it seems that every time they win a Grammy, they got kicked off of whatever label they happened to be on at the time.

Asleep At The Wheel started out as a hippie country band, and they went way out in the country to the unlikely place of Paw Paw, West Virginia to do it. They were trying to both form a band and live off the land. which resulted in a lot crazy stories. After a year, encouraged by Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, they move west to the bay area, finding a crowded house in Oakland and trying to survive on no money. One of the people they met on the coast was a country music fan named Van Morrison, who had them open a few of his shows, and more importantly mentioned them in a *Rolling Stone* interview which attracted the attention of record companies. (Three decades later, when Van Morrison decided to tour

behind his country album, *Pay The Devil*, he borrowed a couple of Wheel members for his road band.)

The band signed with United Artists Records and at the invitation of Willie Nelson moved to Austin, Texas at the very beginning of the Austin Music scene. They've been on innumerable labels since, with their best and longest run on Capitol in the mid-'70s and been through bad times and good, but stopping playing was never an option.

The book provides a good glimpse at the inner workings of the music business. Benson doesn't hold back from discussing contract negotiations and naming names. And while Asleep At The Wheel as long as they've been around, are pretty much known to those who know about them, always on the fringes of country and too damn weird for rock and roll. Benson has worked or toured with a lot of musicians including those not necessarily country like Bob Dylan. And he's met a few Presidents as well.

If there's a fault with the book, it's a little too informal. There's some things that probably should have been in acknowledgments and not in the book itself, but ultimately those are minor complaints.